



Aruba enjoys a visit from the man that would be Elvis

For the past few weeks, one of the top ten Elvis imitators in the world has been visiting Aruba, a regular ritual he enjoys at least twice a year with his family consisting of his parents, Chris and Al, and his younger brother Joey. Anthony Ciaglia, at the tender age of seventeen was chosen above over 400 other professional entertainers as one of the top ten Elvis imitators during the “Images of Elvis” competition that is held annually in Memphis, Tennessee, despite the fact that it was the first time he had ever performed on stage. He repeated that victory again the next year. Anthony’s story is not about being an Elvis imitator though; it is a story of triumph over adversity, an inspirational story of the power of unconditional love and support, which was provided by his family.

Anthony and his family are originally from Summerlin, Texas. One summer, while attending YMCA camp with his brother Joey he was run over accidentally while swimming by a thirteen-year-old camper on a jet ski. Anthony experienced such a head trauma, that doctors described it to his parents as if “someone had put it in a jar and shook violently.” His brain was bruised in thirty-two places and a portion of the right frontal lobe was “disintegrated.”

In the medical helicopter that airlifted him to a Dallas hospital, he died and was revived three times. During this time, his father Al was racing from his work to the hospital, sobbing. “When they called, they told us our son had been in a terrible accident, but they never said which one. Not that it mattered, but we had no idea if it was Joey or Tony. I was a wreck, I drove insanely, on the shoulder of the road, at dangerous speeds, I hoped the cops would stop me so they could provide an escort to the hospital.”

During the time that Anthony spent seventeen days on life support and thirty-one in a coma, his parents were given a dire prognosis. They were told that if he survived, it was unlikely that he would be more than a vegetable, or at the very best, severely mentally disabled. Imagine their joy when he opened his eyes, looked at them and said “Hi Mom, Hi Dad!”

A long period of rehabilitation began. Anthony had to learn to do everything all over again. He had to learn to walk, talk, eat and swallow, read, even to recognize every day objects. “I was just like a baby, having to learn everything all over again,” explains Tony. During this difficult time, he made a request of his parents. While in his coma, it was suggested to Chris and Al that they keep Tony stimulated by playing music, and all that Al had available was a homemade tape of an Elvis mix that had been in his car. Anthony asked them to bring that tape to him so he could listen to it during the many tedious hours of his rehabilitation. Soon he started memorizing the lyrics and singing along, and it was discovered he had a newfound talent for mimicry. Previous to his accident the focus of Tony’s life had been sports, and he was quite the school athlete, but his accident forced him to leave that behind. A new fascination with “The King” gave him motivation and pleasure, and would eventually lead to a career at the MGM Grande in Las Vegas. One year after the accident Tony attempted to return to high school, but the students did not really understand the extent of how he had been injured, and it was too difficult. Not only did the students tease him “but I found my entire attitude towards life had changed,” explains Tony. “I had an epiphany. I saw my former friends getting into drugs and the stupid things that teenagers do, and I could not be interested in that life at all. Nearly dying and struggling to return to normal gave me an insight into what is of real value in this world.”

Chris and Al made the decision to arrange home schooling, and Al sold one of his two restaurants so he could be with Tony as much as possible. Al kept Tony close, keeping him by his side through most of the day, wherever he went. This love, support and companionship from his parents, and his brother Joey, three years his junior, but forced at only twelve to become the “big brother” helped Tony to emotionally survive this difficult time.

Years of physical and psychological therapy followed. The portion of Tony’s brain that helps to regulate emotions was destroyed. Today, Tony must take thirteen medications a day to help regulate the functions that would have been controlled by that part of his brain. It was a difficult period of hit and miss over many years to find that magical combination that assists him in being a viable, productive person. Tony acknowledges that the companionship and understanding his family is just as important, if not more, than the concoction of pills he must take everyday to enable him to be the intelligent, amiable and utterly charming person he is today. Tony is actually a walking and talking miracle, a testament to the rapid advances being made in medicine. “The doctor told us if he had had his accident six months sooner, it is most likely they could not have saved him, that is how rapidly progress is being made in the field of cerebral injuries,” explained his father.

When Tony decided to try to make a career of being an Elvis imitator, his father sold the other restaurant and the family moved to Las Vegas. Tony began playing small gigs, and then signed a contract with MGM doing four sets a night of twelve to thirteen different Elvis classics during each set. That means he must recall at least forty-eight to fifty-two songs every night, a remarkable feat for one that doctors predicted would most likely remain “a vegetable” for the rest of his life. When he became successful and gained a reputation as an Elvis imitator, he donated vast amounts of his time to free concerts and fundraisers for disabled groups, the Special Olympics, and brain injury survivors.

The out of court settlement from the lawsuit against the YMCA was enough for Tony’s family to pay all the medical bills and start a successful Mortgage Brokerage that has grown to have branches in seventeen states, with Al as CEO and Joey as COO. After discovering Aruba on a cruise four years ago, the family travels together to the island at least twice a year, often staying a month at a time, enjoying the weather and most of all, the native islanders. Last week, Tony celebrated his twenty-ninth birthday with a great dinner at one of their favorite places, the Amazonia Restaurant. “Aruba is the slammiest place on the earth,” asserts Tony, “I have traveled all over the Caribbean, and I have had to put up with a lot of attitude, from fellow travelers and islanders that don’t know my story, but never from the people of Aruba, I find they accept me in every way. I have never had to explain anything about myself to them; I have only encountered complete acceptance, warmth, and hospitality on the part of the Aruban people. It is my hope to perform here for them someday.” We at The News acknowledge that it would be wonderful to see Tony perform Elvis here, but it is blessing enough that our shores are graced with such wonderful visitors as Tony and his family. We look forward to their visits for many years to come.